

Question: What is Islam? Elaborate the salient features of Islam.

Islam offers a divinely revealed and comprehensive worldview governing man's moral, intellectual, legal, and social existence. In the literal sense, Islam is derived from Arabic roots denoting peace and submission. In its essential meaning, Islam is not merely a set of stipulated rules and rituals; rather, it denotes a complete code of life encompassing man's relationship with Allah, with His creation including and notably fellow human beings, and the broader social and moral order. Thus, Islam represents a wider framework for individual and collective existence, and its significance may be better understood through its major salient features.

Tauheed - The principle of divine unity

Tauheed - belief in oneness of God - lies at the foundation of Islamic belief system. It is a belief in supreme authority and sovereignty of Allah. Quran describes this attribute of sovereignty in the chapter 112 'Al-Ikhlās' - 'He is Allah, One. Allah, The Eternal Refuge, He neither begets, nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent.'

In the foundational declaration of faith, one affirms the oneness of Allah, that establishes the primary significance of Tauheed. In essence, believing in divine unity is a prerequisite to fully accepting the doctrine of Islam and practicing the divinely guided way of life.

Vicegerency of Man - Khalafat

Flowing from the doctrine of Tauheed is the accountability and moral duty bestowed on man as a vicegerent of Allah. Islam gives man dignity, moral agency, and responsibility as Allah declares in Quran - 'Indeed I will place upon the Earth a vicegerent (khalifah) (2:30). Thus the status of man in Islam is not merely a passive agent navigating life without a broader purpose, but he is divinely assigned

The role wherein he is instructed to maintain and establish the beliefs and practices laid in Quran as fundamentally ordained.

Afzalur Rahman in 'Islamic Ideology' further argues that man was created with infinite potentialities to assimilate divine attributes and thus become the vicegerent of Allah on earth.

Finality of Prophethood - Khātm e Nabuwah

To guide mankind in fulfilling this responsibility as a vicegerent, Allah completed his revelation through his final messenger Muhammad (SAWs). Islam explicitly presents Prophet Muhammad (SAWs) as The Seal of the Prophets, more precisely Quran declares: 'Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but He is the messenger of Allah, and the seal of the prophets.' (33:40). So the prophetic legacy culminates in the final messenger Prophet Muhammad (SAWs), and his Sunnah (including his teachings and practices) lays fundamental groundwork of Islamic tradition.

Foundational sources of Islamic knowledge

The revelation and guidance is preserved and made accessible through Quran and Sunnah - that form the authoritative basis of belief and conduct in Islam. Quran and Sunnah constitute the primary sources of Islamic traditions, as Syed Hossein Nasr in 'Ideals and Realities of Islam' observes - Prophet's Hadith and Sunnah are, after the Quran, most important sources of the Islamic tradition'. The significance of revelation and prophetic authority can be comprehensively realised through the Quranic command in 4:59: 'O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messengers...'

If you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger.' Thus, Islamic ideology owes its essential structure and philosophical basis to Quran and Sunnah.

Ethical and Social principles of Islam

Deriving from traditions of Sunnah and Quranic teachings, Islam develops a social and moral order to regulate individual and collective life of mankind. Islamic morality and ethics are not a private belief system or passive contemplation, rather they are characterised by creative, life-ordering, and socially constructive practices.

To illustrate the social breadth of Islamic ethics, it is useful to refer to Quran (16:90) - 'Indeed, Allah commands justice, excellence, and giving to relatives, and forbids immorality, wrongdoing, and transgression.' Essentially, Islam requires social justice to be maintained, combatting economic tyranny, protecting the weak against the strong, and establishing justice between man and woman as Afzal ur Rahman argues in his book 'Islamic Ideology'.

Ijtihad and inherent dynamism of Islam

While Islam is a principled social and moral order rooted in Quran and Sunnah, it also possesses inherent dynamism in its structure. Not every contemporary issue may be accurately treated in the traditional texts of Quran and Sunnah, so Islam does not limit later generations to earlier juristic reasoning. Ijtihad is the dynamic framework of thought and reasoning in social-legal terms, that allows continual renewal of Islamic law inside the broader structure of Shariah and the legal tradition. Allama Muhammad Iqbal, in his work 'The Reconstruction of Pure Religious Thought in Islam', notes how Islam contains a principle of movement. Thus Islam provides through Ijtihad a contemporary reinterpretation of evolving complexities of life.

Universal Brotherhood and Egalitarianism

Islam establishes a universal human equality and lays egalitarian principles that extend across race, class, gender, and religious/ethnic identities. Islam rejects superiority on the basis of race, tribe, wealth or lineage, and further explicitly declares righteousness and piety as the sole basis of elevated worth. Quran states in 49:13 this foundational concept of equality: 'O mankind, We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you...'. This vision is also reflected in Islam's treatment of men and women in the spiritual sphere, as delineated in 33:35 in Quran, 'Indeed the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, ..., for them Allah has prepared forgiveness

and a great reward.' This verse assigns equal moral worth and accountability to both men and women, signifying a moral vision that applies to all human beings in their relationship with Allah. Thus, Islam fosters a moral community in which human dignity is universal and any kind of superiority only depends on righteousness and piety.

Thus, Islam emerges as a comprehensive, balanced, divinely guided, and universal system of life. Its doctrinal foundations, embedded in Quran and Sunnah, form the basis of its pivotal features like Tauheed, and the finality of prophethood. Human role and responsibility as a vicegerent of Allah derive from these foundations. Further encompassing all domains of personal and social existence, Islam outlines universal ideals of brotherhood, human equality, and socio-ethnic dealings. Islam also possesses a distinctive quality of adaptability and continuity evident through its framework of ijtihad, maintaining its relevance as theological and moral code of life. Ultimately, Islam harmonises faith, morality, and society, while remaining enduringly relevant.